



# Pipe Dream

## Church organist continues quest to build organ at home

By MICHAEL SANTA RITA  
Gazette Reporter

**B**rian Hoffman is a 21st-century guy with a 16th-century job. The 33-year-old's official title at St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady is "Organist and Composer in Residence." In Martin Luther's time, they would have called him "Kapellmeister." Sound cute? It is tiring work. While other thirtysomethings are joining the dot-com gold rush or sweating out their days in cubicles, Hoffman during the past three decades has gradually cleared his own path less traveled, committed to music. Today, he is a rare 21st-century man: a full-time religious artist.

During his time at St. George's, he has composed three Masses, numerous motets and some choral pieces. He has arranged the music for liturgies and played at funerals, weddings and, of course, dozens of Sunday services.

"I am working on my fourth Mass right now," he said.

### Home project

When he is not at the church, composing or preparing for concerts, he is practicing, or at work building a vast pipe organ on his property in Berne.

To complete the project, which has taken almost three years, Hoffman travels to various churches in the Capital Region and around the state, gathering discarded pipes and other organ parts.



DAVID J. ROGOWSKI  
Gazette  
Photographer

Above, Brian Hoffman stands among pipes varying in length from 32 feet to the size of a pencil to work on the organ he is building in his Berne studio.

Left, the church organist plays at the console to check the progress of his instrument.

It is fair to say that this old, vast, complicated and often cantankerous instrument consumes his life. It may be such a jealous mistress because it is so difficult to play. With foot pedals, three keyboards and "stops" that are continually pulled out and reinserted, the organ can sometimes make the piano look about as complicated as a tambourine.

The Oneonta native began studying the organ seriously when he was 11 years old. He continued studying it at Ithaca College in Ithaca, and later transferred to the University at Albany, where he majored in composition.

A chance remark by a friend sent him to an audition at St. George's, which accepted him for the full-time organist's position, in which his decades-long musical apprenticeship flowered into a fascination with how the

mechanized instrument worked. Gradually, he began figuring out its intricacies.

Today, on his off hours, armed with textbooks and advice from a friend downstate, Hoffman works on constructing the Swell, the Great and the Positive, the three sets of pipes that correspond with the instrument's keyboards.

He also connects the circuits needed to operate electro-pneumatic valve systems, which in turn fill small pouches with air and then the organ pipes with sound. He expects to be finished with the bulk of the project by the end of the year.

He has also constructed a small shelter to house the instrument that almost shakes when he launches into a fugue by Johann

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# Hoffman says sound of organ is religious experience in itself

Continued from Page D1

Sebastian Bach. As he taps away on the keyboards and pedals, the home-made instrument chugs into life, roaring out its presence loudly as it churns its vibrant musical gumbo.

When the organ speaks there, is no choice but to listen.

This is perhaps what makes it such a great religious instrument. For Hoffman, a practicing Episcopalian, listening to its sound in itself can be a transforming experience.

"I think you can worship just as well by listening as by singing," he said.

## Beginning with Bach

For beginners wanting to appreciate organ music, the instrument's most important composer was Bach, Hoffman said. Bach, who once walked 200 miles to see his favorite organist play, was the instrument's greatest composer, the Shakespeare of music.

All other composers have studied him and been marked by him in some way, Hoffman said.

"He defined the organ as it is now. You don't study the organ without studying Bach. Everything comes from him," he said.

Hoffman has taken a personal pilgrimage to Europe to visit the great organs there and regularly makes field trips to organs around the state.

He is organizing a bus trip to St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan on May 7 for any who want to watch him play the organ there. On June 25, he will warm up for the trip with performances at St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady.

While the main part of the organ will be finished by the end of the year, Hoffman said will continue to add to the instrument, which like his music and his life, will always be growing together. Of the organ, he said, "It'll never be finished."

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